Conditions of Puerto Ricans in the US

"In the midst of crisis there is hope...

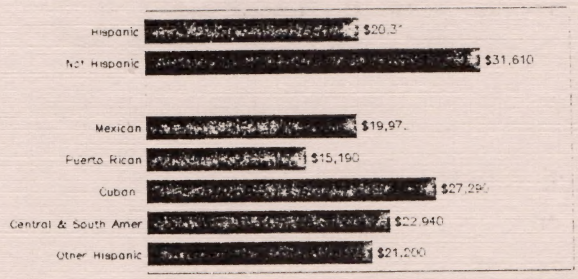
hope must come from the people themselves, imposing themselves, understanding their world and acting upon it."

José López, Executive Director,
Puerto Rican Cultural Center, Chicago

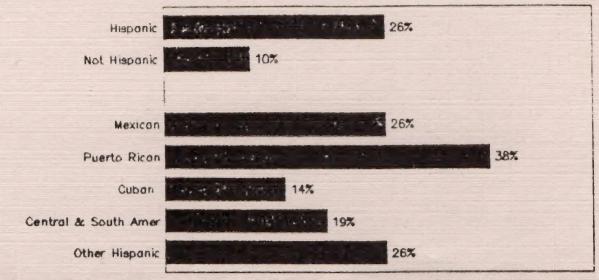
The American Dream of a house in the suburbs, new cars and the family vacation has not come true for the majority of Puerto Ricans in this country. Instead, Puerto Ricans' life here is a continuation of US colonialism — economic, political and social control over the lives of the Puerto Rican people.

Puerto Ricans started coming to the US in large numbers in the 1950's, when the US began a massive industrialization of Puerto Rico. The transformation of Puerto Rico from a self-sufficient, agricultural nation to a highly mechanized and industrialized nation meant that the need for Puerto Rican workers sharply decreased. To reduce the possibility of strikes and unrest due to the high level of unemployment, the US encouraged Puerto Ricans to emigrate to the US. Offering cheap flights and promises of economic prosperity, the US lured hundreds of thousands. Instead of "streets paved with gold," Puerto Ricans found the slums of New York, Chicago and other cities in the Northeast. The US Census Bureau Report, entitled "The Hispanic Population in the United States: March, 1988", shown here by graphs, reveals the truth that racism and colonialism can't hide.

MEDIAN MONEY INCOME OF HISPANIC FAMILIES IN 1987, BY TYPE OF ORIGIN: MARCH 1988



PERCENT OF HISPANIC FAMILIES BELOW THE POVERTY LEVEL IN 1987, BY TYPE OF ORIGIN: MARCH 1988



SOURCE: U.S. BUREAU OF THE CENSUS

The Myth of the Melting Pot

The US economy is increasingly moving factories and jobs for unskilled workers outside the US — to countries such as Mexico and Taiwan, where workers are paid next to nothing. Within the US, the development of a service economy requiring a college education means that fewer and fewer jobs will be available for Latin and Black people. The reality? Thousands of Puerto Rican and Black youth compete for minimum wage jobs flipping hamburgers.

The cold statistics shown above are a living reality full of suffering and misery for the Puerto Rican people living in the West Town neighborhood in Chicago, or in El Barrio and the Bronx in New York City. Add to these conditions decrepit housing, police brutality and racism and we see that for Puerto Ricans, the US is not a melting pot which will permit them, or their kids, to get ahead. US colonialism is hidden behind the decrepit brick houses and in the "ghettoized" neighborhoods where most white people never go.

Puerto Rican youth face an uncertain future. They go to schools where they are taught that the only civilization and history of value is that of white people; they are taught by racist teachers who try to instill in them a sense of their inferiority. The results? A 75% drop-out rate from Roberto Clemente High School, the main Puerto Rican high school in Chicago. Faced with a bleak future, Puerto Rican youth are increasingly turning to drugs to escape the unpleasant reality — and then become drug dealers to support their habit.

Faced with these conditions, Puerto Ricans assert national pride by flying Puerto Rican flags throughout the community. They proudly refer to themselves as Puerto Rican, not Puerto Rican-American. Additionally, Puerto Ricans maintain strong ties with their homeland by frequent visits to friends and family in Puerto Rico.

There is an active Independence movement in the US that fights to end US colonialism in Puerto Rico and here in the US. The movement builds support for an independent homeland and defends those arrested for participation in that struggle to transform the conditions of Puerto Ricans here as well. Emphasis is placed on reclaiming the heritage that has been denied the Puerto Rican people by US colonialism. Within the heritage and historical traditions lie the seeds for self-determination, self-sufficiency and self-development.

SUN-TIMES/Kathleen Reeve

A group of Clemente High School students rally at the Dirksen Federal Building Thursday to protest the reinstatement of their school librarian, whom they accuse of being racist.

Reclaiming the Past Building the Future

To break the bonds of dependency fostered by the US, Puerto Ricans have established the Don Juan Antonio Corretjer Puerto Rican Cultural Center in Chicago, as well as centers in Hartford, New York, Philadelphia and Boston.

Developed 15 years ago, and located in Chicago at 1671 N. Claremont, the center is an institution which serves the cultural and educational needs of the Puerto Rican community. The center offers several programs. The Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos Puerto Rican High School, an independent alternative high school, has won national acclaim as one of the best alternative high schools in the country. The high school teaches basic educational skills, along with classes in Puerto Rican history. The school, working mainly with high school dropouts or students with family problems, teaches the "basics" along with pride in being Puerto Rican.

The center operates a bilingual day care program for children between the ages of two and one-half and five. There is an adult learner center with a bi-cultural adult education program. There is also a fascinating library with a collection of over 100,000 volumes — the largest private Puerto Rican library in the US. Morovivi Productions is committed to the development of the arts through emphasis on the political and historical aspects of the Puerto Rican reality.

Redevelopment = Whites In Puerto Ricans Out

Most recently, a community-based housing project called BOHIO has been formed. This housing alternative was established to promote the attitude that housing is a need and a right, not an excuse to make profits; to resist the efforts of whites to buy or push Puerto Ricans out of the neighborhood; and, to build a collective response to the needs of the community.

Victorian Gardens in West Town, Chicago replaces housing for 24 families with four luxury units for Yuppies.

The Puerto Rican community has been struck hard by AIDS. In response to the spread of this devastating disease, the community has established the VIDA/SIDA (AIDS) program to alert people to the causes and reality of AIDS, and to build a movement to support those with AIDS and to fight for their rights and needs.

The West Town Community Law Office provides legal representation to the Puerto Rican community. This all-woman law office represents not only the Puerto Rican political prisoners and POWs, but specializes in cases of domestic violence.

The Puerto Rican Independence movement represents a serious challenge to the US. It is in the unique position of organizing both in Puerto Rico and here in the US. As North Americans, we have an important role to play in supporting this just struggle. It is our government that subjugates the Puerto Rican people. Our opposition can help to end colonialism. We need your help!

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

1. Add your name to our mailing list.
2. Arrange a tour of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center.
3. Arrange for speakers or a slide show on Puerto Ricans in the US for your friends, class or organization.
4. Make a tax-deductible donation to the Puerto Rican Cultural Center.
5. Volunteer your time at the Cultural Center: tutor students, teach a class, or give a seminar in your area of expertise.

For more information contact:
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